JESUS THE LORD
MATTHEW 27:62 - 28:9

APRIL 2, 1972 EASTER
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Whatever else you want to say about Pontius Pilate, he must have been an incredibly patient man. Ever since the first day of the week he had been trying to deal fairly with this group of men. Initially it had been a rumor about a minor disturbance around the Temple area. It seems that a Galilean had come riding into the city with a band of rabble rousers following him, shouting and singing, and that he had gone to the Temple court and turned over a few tables. And then they started to come to him - Pilate - with their problems. A few came alone, but as the days passed, delegations of self-inportant men came solemnly, each time more urgently. He frankly wanted no part of it, but he got dragged into it - against his better judgement - until Friday he had finally consented to interogate the offender. By that time, of course, the minor incident had blossomed into a major crisis. The streets were filled with people screaming for the man's death: nothing Pilate did or said disuaded them. And so he obeyed the survival instinct of the politician: when the chips are down lay principles aside tha do whatever is practical. He washed his hands for all of them to see - and ordered the man to be executed.

It had been a hellish week for Pontius Pilate. Passovers were always rough in Jerusalem, and this year it had almost gotten out of hand. But now it was over: Jesus was dead: and for the first time in several days, Pilate got a good night's sleep.

Then came Saturday morning: the Sabbath, when everything was quiet, streets empty, no activity whatever, and Pilate must have began that day with a monumental sigh of relief. But, here they were again: that same delegation of self-important religious officials, tired old men. "What now? An extra guard for the tomb in Joseph's garden? You have to be kidding! The man is dead! The soldiers made doubly sure of that. Besides the body was wrapped and buried". "But Excellency", they said - and I can imagine Pilate's stoic sigh of patient despair - "that imposter said something about being raised from the dead after three days: and if we don't do something his disciples might steal the body -

and then go around crowing about a resurrection: that, sir, would be very bad for all of us, as you must understand."

Pilate the politician - the pragmatist - played the game one more time, but this time with a catch. "You have a cordon of guards assigned to the Temple: they are at your disposal. Use them, if it's that important to you."

He must of sensed that they were frightened old men and I think he must have enjoyed the irony of that moment. They said, of course, that they were afraid, that the disciples might steal the body. But Pilate knew and they knew that religious hoaxes have a way of burning themselves out rather quickly. He must have sensed that their real fear - their terror, actually - was about something else, something they had not dared mention, even to each other: namely that what he predicted would happen in fact; that the dead body would breathe and move and get up and walk out of that tomb.

If that happened they would be in trouble. And so, instead of kicking them unceremoniously out into the street as he was inclined to do, he played the game one more time, chuckling this time, because these tired, frightened old men were asking him to protect them from a miracle: asking him - Pilate - to make their world safe from an act of God himself. And even though he was not a particularly religious man he knew that the suggestion was preposterous - a little like trying to stop the wind, or keep the sun from rising. So, off they went, with their little cordon of guards to secure the tomb.

Why, do you suppose the Chief Priests and Pharises were so afraid? There are probably several reasons. First of all, they were the ones responsible for his death and they knew it. But let's not make the arrogant mistake of blaming Judaism - or Jews for it. The tragedy of that error has been spelled out it pogroms, gas chambers and the fact that if your name is Rubenstein you probably can't belong to the Country Club. We're not talking about historic, corporate guilt. What we are talking about is the fact that several men were deeply involved in a conspiracy and a coalition with the Romans to get rid of him.

And if you stand in those particular shoes, you have every reason to be afraid if the victim of your conspiring might some day confront you personally

That's one thing. The second is that if he did come back to life he would be the Lord - and his Lordship, now confirmed in a resurrection, would stand over and against their whole religious system. And if you're given your life to a system, if you believe in it enough to kill other men for the sake of its peace and purity, you are afraid of having it shaken at its very foundations. That's the second thing.

Third, and most important of all: if your world is all neatly wrapped up, if everything fits into a category, if all is safe and well and comfortable: if you know about God and where you stand in relation to him: if you know what he does and what to expect of him: if you have your hand on the ultimate truth about ultimate things - something like a resurrection can be very upsetting and disturbing.

So they did their best, tired, frightened old men with a cordon of guards going out to stop the wind and keep the sun from rising. The rest is history. And yet that scene has been played over and over again down through the years. It is a well-known preacher's feeling that ministers play it every Easter morning. Not securing the tomb, of course. IT'S A LITTLE LATE FOR THAT: the genie is out of the bottle and there is no way to stuff him back in. Twenty centures later we simply try to explain it: to defuse it: to make it safe: to find good, solid, reasons Why it couldn't have happened. For we are still very uncomfortable living in a world in which a resurrection has happened. And with good reason. We are still uncomfortable with the thought that Jesus really is the Lord - with good reason.

Since that Saturday morning in Jerusalem long ago men have shown an astonishing ability to avoid the resurrection. To read the bibliography of titles devoted to explaining it away is to sense that we are obsessed with it. Let me mention just a few possibilities.

First, we like to assume that those people around Jesus, and those people who later wrote the Gospels were just a little naive and unsophisticated. They could believe in that kind of thing: they could believe in a resurrection from the dead without batting an eye. We like to assume that we are the first people in history that have had common sense and a real scientific knowledge of the way things really are. As a matter of fact, resurrections have always been astonishing. The disciples didn't expect it to happen: when they were first told about it they flately refused to believe it. They were frightened by it: they doubted it: they wanted to disbelieve it. That's what the record shows. Thomas held out to the very last.

Second, it has been suggested that the disciples sat down later and created the story and then went out and sold it to some very gullible people. And yet, common sense tells me that even P. T. Barnum wouldn't try that one. But more to the point, the New Testament accounts of the Resurrection read like anything but a manufactured fable. There are four accounts and not one of them squares with the other: there are rampant contradictions and discrepencies and a monumental amount of confusion. In fact, it's not a story at all. It is an announcement made in spirt of the common sense of the writers: an announcement so incredible that they didn't even bother to fill in the details. Surely, if they made it up they would have at least checked to make sure they had their stories straight.

Third, the discrepencies in the accounts have been used to disprove the fact, A strange way of coming at it in that the oldest test for forging is to superimpose one signature on another, and if they are exact one has to be a phoney. One New Testament writer punctures this line of criticism with historic precident: "Polybius, the Greek historian, and Livy, the Latin historian, represent Hannibal in his invasion of Italy crossing theAlps by completely different routes, routes which by no stretch of the imagination can be harmonized, yet no one doubts that Hannibal most certainly arrived in Italy". (Wm. Barclay - The Mind of Chr' P. 303)

Thereare other possibilities, of course: the body snatching theory: the mistaken tomb theory: the 'swoon' theory that holds that he really wasn't dead: one of the best came from the ancient churchman Tertullian, who with tongue in cheek suggested that the gardner removed the body 'lest his lettuces should be trampled by the throng of visitors. (Ibid. P. 294)

And it proceeds right up to the present in a 'block buster' novel by Irving Wallace about the discovery of an ancient manuscript which proves that Jesus died of old age.

If only we could explain it away! If only we could come to church on Easter and enjoy the holiday manufactured by the clothing and candy industry, have a good ham dinner and let it go at that. Well,gook luck: because it cannot be done.

For, at the heart of the Gospel - at the heart of the life of the Church - at the heart of the only faith that can be called Christian - is the conviction that there is a God who is God: who cannot and will not be explained by the rational categories of the mind: a God who comes into the life of the world - beginning with those distant and cloudy events involving a band of Hebrew slaves somehow managing to get out of Egypt: a God who keeps intruding into the life of his people, finally in the birth of a humble carpenter's son, finally in that life and that death: and now in our history - in your history and mine. That's the central affinitive of Christian Faith: that's what the three word creed "Jesus the Lord" means. And that's exactly what has driven the philosophers and academicians right up their book-lined walls.

When Pascal died- a great man of letters, a scrap of paper was found sewn up in his coat. It said simply: "Fire! Not the god of the philosophers! The God of Abraham, the God of Issac, the God of Jacob!' (Leslie Newbigin, Honest Religion for Secular Man, P. 47)

And Leslie Newbigin, modern theologian asks pointedly, "Can one really believe that Jesus rose from the dead? And answers, simply "No - not if your starting point is somewhere else. But if like the apostles, you have come to a point where every other foundation has been knocked away, and you have no

coherent understanding of experience in which you can live and act with hope, then you may find that the testimony of the apostles is not only credible, but in fact the only rock on which you can begin to build." (Ibid P.55)

That's the issue. If the resurrection happened, it is the central reality with which we must deal: it is the starting point: the foundation: and on this day we are here to affirm it and celebrate it.

It means, for instance, that things are not what they seem in our world. It means that we may live in hope. Now hope,has become a very important word recently, in part I suppose because the world looks so grim. But the resurrection of Jesus Christ means that God is still God: that the future is still his: that he is alive and well and still about his work of freeing captive people and reconciling men to each other and binding up wounds. Hope - in spite of how bad it looks.

It means that good is more powerful than evil: that an untimate battle has been fought and won: and that we can commit ourselves to the cause of justice and love and peace and honesty.and kindness without ever questioning the final outcome of the struggle. That was established long ago.

It means that what we do matters: that we matter: that all our efforts and tears and sweat do not result in nothingness: but that because he lives we shall live. It means that we can afford that ultimate freedom of laughing in the face of our own death. Every year I read one sentence from William Stringfellow at this point here it comes again - "His resurrection means the possibility of living this life, in the very midst of death's works, safe and free" (Free in Obedience. P.72)

That's the incredible good news of this day. And it keeps authenticating itself in our midst time and time again. For instance, in the case of Alexander Solzhenitsyn a Russian novelist who won the Nobel Prize, who is not allowed to receive his award money: who in old age - received his first communion: Solzhenitsyn is constantly harrassed by his government: his works are banned: and he lives in constant fear of arrest. He wrote a prayer that somehow got

out: listen to it: -

How easy to live with you, O Lord
How easy to believe in you
When my spirit is overwhelmed within me,
When even the keenest see no further than the night
And no not what to do tomorrow,
You bestow on me the certitude
that you exist and are mindful of me,
that all the paths of righteousness are not barred.

That's what it means to live in a world in which Resurrection has happened.

Less dramatically, I experienced it on Maunday Thursday, as a group of Protestant ministers served communion to patients in St. Elizabeth Hospital. Three of my ten patients were quite ill and in a lot of pain. and their tears of gratitude - the momentary peace and serenity which somehow passed from my hand to theirs - in a wafer and a paper cup - forced me again to confront the awesome reality that I cannot explain or even understand apart from the words "Jesus is Lord and he is among us.

How to conclude an Easter sermon? It's always a problem. In preparation for this day we preachers do a lot of reading and studying and note taking. And I could read a T. S. Eliot poem, or a John Calvin vignette. I could quote Paul Tillich or the Apostel Paul. But the most eloquent prose I found last week came from a most unlikely source - from my six year old son's Church School Book. It somehow seems very appropriate - in these very simple words that children can feel - even big children. Let me share it with you.

Every year in the springtime in the country where Jesus lived, there was a big holiday. Whole families - mothers and fathers and children - took a long trip to the city of Jerusalem to visit the temple. The temple was like a church, but it was more beautiful than any other church they had ever seen.

One year Jesus and his grown-up friends went along with a big crowd of people. The people were very glad that Jesus was with them. He was their friend. He had taught them about God: he had helped the sick people; he had made many people happier.

Jesus and his friends knew that this was a very special trip to Jerusalem.

Jesus had important work to do there. One of his disciples brought a donkey for Jesus to ride into the city. One of the people made a comfortable seat for Jesus on the donkey's back. Other people spread their clothes in the road so that there would be a kind of carpet to ride on. Then others broke branches from the trees and waved them.

Then the whole crowd of people shouted and sang together, "Hosanna! Blessed be he wo comes in the name of the Lord.

When the crowd came into the city, and the people there saw Jesus riding on the donkey and heard the singing, they thought that Jesus must be a very wonderful person - perhaps even someone God had sent to help them in a special way! So they, too, shouted and sang as Jesus passed by.

Then Jesus rode right up to the great temple and went in. He looked at all the beautiful things there, and he thought about God.

For God really had sent Jesus!

Jesus had come to tell the people about God - to show them God's love.

Jesus stayed in the great city of Jerusalem nearly a week. Everyday he went to the temple, and there he talked to the people about God. Some of the people listened and were glad that Jesus had come. But others did not understand what Jesus told them. They did not want to love one another. They did not want to love God as Jesus taught them.

Some of those people were very unkind to Jesus. They hurt him very much, and he died.

His friends and all the people who had loved Jesus were very sad. They were lonely without him. They missed hearing the stories he had told them. They wanted to be with him and talk to him.

Then a very strange thing happened. Suddenly their sadness and loneliness was gone. They knew that Jesus was not dead anymore. They knew that he was right there with them in a new way and that he would be with them wherever they might go. Jesus said, "I am with you always.

This is the wonderful good news of Jesus. He showed us God's love. He wants us to share that love with everyone we meet.

To that I would say AMEN and a blessed Resurrection Day to all of you.

Our father, just as there are no minds among us great enough to comprehend what has happened, so none of us has words to describe our feelings. Help us, father, this day and everyday to know that we are safe and free because our Lord who was dead is alive. AMEN.